

DIRTY LITTLE SECRETS OF ONLINE PANELS

*And How the One You Select
Can Make or Break Your Study*

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INTRODUCTION

Online panels are a commodity. They're pretty much all the same. It doesn't really matter whether you use Harris Interactive, Toluna, Survey Spot, or any of the others for your research work.

Wrong.

Online panels are *not* all the same – not even close. And we can prove it.

According to a 2006 *Advertising Age* article citing research by comScore, “Just 0.25% of the population supplies 32% of responses to online surveys,” and “50% of all survey responses come from less than 5% of the population.” In other words, the same respondents are completing surveys over and over and over. And over. And over...

Think about your most recent online survey. How well do you know the online panel that was used? Was your study the first one respondents had completed that week, or the tenth? Was it the first one they had completed that *day*, or the tenth? Were your questions the only ones they answered in the survey, or did the panel company slip in other questions from other clients? When you chose one panel provider, is that where your respondents actually came from? There are some critical differences among the various online panel options you have for your research – and what you don't know most definitely *can* hurt you.

Grey Matter Research & Consulting recently put many of the major online panels to a test. We had mystery shoppers sign up as members of the various panels for thirty days. They were instructed to answer every question honestly, reflecting their actual demographics, behavior, and opinions. The only difference between our mystery shoppers and the typical online panel member was that our shoppers carefully tracked each survey invitation they received.

The following panels were selected for this test:

- American Consumer Opinion (Decision Analyst)
- Global Test Market (GMI)
- Greenfield Online
- Harris Interactive
- i-Say (Ipsos)
- Mindfield (McMillion Research)
- Opinion Outpost (Western Wats)
- Survey Exchange (OTX)
- SurveySavvy (Luth Research)
- SurveySpot (Survey Sampling)
- Toluna (formerly Your2Cents)
- ZoomPanel (MarketTools)

Panels where membership is by invitation only, such as Knowledge Networks, Authentic Response, and e-rewards, were not included in this test because there was no easy way for our shoppers to access them. However, the same questions must be raised about them as about the ones we actually tested.

Over a month's time, how many survey opportunities is the typical online panel member receiving? How many questionnaires are they allowed to complete? What's the experience like being a member of each panel?

The differences among these major panels were enormous.

We have chosen not to identify each panel by name in this report. Rather, we will call them Panel 1, Panel 2, etc. Our purpose in this study is not to single out particular panels for praise or criticism, but to demonstrate how critical it is for you to know the details about the panels you choose to use for your projects.



WHAT WE FOUND

What we found was a good news/bad news situation. The good news for researchers is that some of the more popular online panels actually do what they claim – they severely limit how frequently panel members are able to participate in surveys.

The bad news is that this most definitely did not apply to every panel. Two major, well-known national panels in particular bombarded our shoppers with invitation after invitation – multiple surveys in the same day, nearly every day.

Sadly, these panels are being used by major corporations and major research companies on behalf of their clients. These end clients are getting what is likely to be poor quality research and limited insight from overused respondents. The critical question is: *are you one of them?*

Another bit of bad news is that beyond the sheer number of invitations some panels send to their members, there are a number of other ways you may not be getting what you expect when you use an online panel for your research. But we'll get to that in a moment...

Before providing the details for each panel, we should point out that we realize this is not an exact, statistically valid quantitative measure for each one. Without a doubt, the exact number of invitations a panel member receives will depend on their demographics and other profile information. There may also be variation according to seasonality. The numbers we provide in this report are not exact, comparative measures for each panel, but a reflection of what typical panel members experience.

Our shoppers also behaved as typical panel members do, meaning they didn't wait by their e-mail to respond to every invitation within moments of receiving it. They responded to every invitation within three days (although often it was within hours of receiving the invitation). This meant some studies were closed by the time shoppers got to them – but this fact in itself was fairly instructive.

The numbers shown for each panel are what the *average* panel member experienced for one month – *not* cumulative among all of the mystery shoppers.



PANEL 1

Invitations Received in 30 Days per Panel Member: 50.5

Average Frequency: 1.7 invitations *every day*

Completed Surveys: 10.5

Did Not Qualify: 27

Closed: 8

Other: 5 (this included a couple of surveys that could not be completed due to technical problems, and a few more that our shoppers simply refused to participate in due to lengths of 60 minutes or more)

Although it has one of the best-known names out there, this panel was the worst of all possible worlds. Not only are panel members inundated with multiple invitations in the same day (nearly every day), but there appeared to be no limit to the number of invitations a panel member could receive or the number of studies in which they could participate.

Making matters worse, nearly every survey led to another survey. Once a panel member completed one study, she was immediately invited to another study...and another...and another. In fact, exactly 4% of all invitations our shoppers received did not lead to multiple survey opportunities in a row.

And it wasn't just one more survey, or two, but nearly unlimited opportunities. As an example, look at two experiences on consecutive days by one of our shoppers:

- Friday: did not qualify for the first survey, so was sent to another one. Also did not qualify for that one, so was sent to a third, where he again did not qualify. Then was sent to the first questionnaire a second time (obviously again not qualifying), then to a fifth (again did not qualify), then was invited to a questionnaire lasting 60 minutes – and finally called it a day.
- Saturday: quota was filled on the first survey, so he was sent to a second (for which he did not qualify), then a 60-minute questionnaire that had technical problems that meant he couldn't complete it. He moved on to a fourth questionnaire which also had technical

problems, then a fifth (didn't qualify), then a sixth (did not qualify), then a seventh which he completed, then an eighth – and finally gave up.

The numbers shown above for “invitations received” and “completed surveys” are only the surveys that were attempted directly from an initial, e-mailed invitation. Our shoppers very easily could have sat for hours doing nothing but completing surveys for this one panel, and the numbers above could have tripled, quadrupled, or worse.

Now, the question is: how would you like *your* survey to be seventh or eighth in line for your respondents? After what might be hours of answering questionnaires, how attentive do you think the respondent will be in answering *your* questions? What kind of data quality do you think you would be getting from respondents who would spend hours of their time in this manner?

Apparently, some researchers either remain blithely unaware of what they're getting, or they don't care about data quality. Through this panel, our shoppers completed surveys for a number of Fortune 500 companies, as well as for some very large, well-known research companies.

Just to add insult to injury, this panel also used a survey portal on every invitation. Before attempting a survey about coffee (for instance), respondents would be asked a short battery of other questions about themselves (such as what car they own, or whether they are planning a home improvement project in the next three months). These were not questions requested by the client, but questions inserted by the panel company to pre-qualify respondents for other lower-incidence studies. The problem is, the client for any given survey may have no control over what questions are asked in the portal before the respondent gets to their study.

If your panel provider is doing this, can you guarantee that they have selected portal questions that will not bias responses you get on *your* survey? Before your respondents answer questions for your organization, do you want them answering other questions over which you have no control?

Finally, this panel invited our shoppers to take surveys lasting 50 minutes, 60 minutes, and 75 minutes – and in each case the incentive was a sweepstakes entry. One is left to wonder what the response rates on those projects must be. Again, think about how attentive a respondent would be to your study if it came second in line behind a 75-minute survey. Obviously, the end client is the one submitting an absurdly long questionnaire and demanding respondents complete it for no tangible incentive. But the panel company had to acquiesce to those project parameters – just one more example that they have little concern about the quality of their panel or the experiences of panel members.

Are your research projects using this panel?



PANEL 2

Invitations Received in 30 Days per Panel Member: 11

Average Frequency: one invitation every 2.7 days

Completed Surveys: 3.5

Did Not Qualify: 5

Closed: 2.5

Not the very best, but definitely not the worst. Because there were a number of studies for which our shoppers did not qualify, it's hard to tell whether panel members would have opportunities to complete even more surveys. Shoppers had a new opportunity every three days or so, but completed surveys only about once a week. That's arguably a reasonable level of engagement for panel members – one that keeps them active, but does not overuse them.

This panel also avoided using portals (which may bias the main study), and did not give panelists an opportunity to complete multiple studies in a row. When our shoppers got an invitation, they either completed it or did not qualify for it – but they did not have an opportunity to keep going and complete study after study after study.

Longer involvement with this panel would be necessary to determine whether panelists get to complete more than about one survey per week, but early indications from our test is that this panel may be a viable alternative for clients seeking good quality online research.



PANEL 3

Invitations Received in 30 Days per Panel Member: 15

Average Frequency: one invitation every 2 days

Completed Surveys: 0.5

Did Not Qualify: 9

Closed: 5.5

This panel was an oddity. Completed surveys were quite rare, but invitations were fairly frequent. The vast majority of all the survey invitations were for projects being completed by other panel companies, including extremely heavy cross-use by Panel 12.

In addition, this panel had a tremendous number of surveys that closed quickly. One shopper received an invitation at 8:28 a.m.; by 10:15 a.m. that same day the study was already closed. Multiple studies closed less than 24 hours after our shoppers were invited to participate, often including overnight hours when relatively few people are awake and on their computers:

- Invitation received Sunday at 6:04 p.m. – survey closed Monday by 8:42 a.m.
- Invitation received Thursday at 5:17 p.m. – “quota group closed” Friday by 8:01 a.m.
- Invitation received Thursday at 4:39 p.m. – “quota group closed” Friday by 8:00 a.m.

- Invitation received Monday at 5:25 p.m. – survey closed Tuesday by 10:15 a.m.
- Invitation received Tuesday at 2:18 p.m. – “quota group closed” Tuesday by 3:10 p.m.

When surveys close this quickly, it may be the decision of the panel company, or of the client. Either way, it presents a major sampling problem. It means that all of your respondents are people who happened to be sitting at their computer in one particular hour, or on one particular evening. Standard telephone interviewing practice is to make multiple callbacks to each number, in order to make sure that the sample is not biased toward people who are inactive and rarely leave home. Allowing a field time of at least a few days with online interviewing increases the response rate, decreases the potential for response bias, and improves the representativeness and quality of the project.

Although it may be the clients demanding such fast close times, the fact that this happened so often (and so quickly) with this particular panel suggests that the panel itself has a hand in these decisions. If you are using this panel, and you do not specify that you want your survey in the field for a number of days, your sample is likely biased toward people who are always on their computer and respond immediately to invitations – in other words, people who are far more likely to be professional respondents. Is that what you really want?

This panel made it very hard to track what was actually happening. Shoppers would click on the survey link and then be told they did not qualify for the study without answering a single question, or up front they would enter their gender and age (both of which are known to the panel company through respondents’ profiles) and then be told that the quota group had already filled. For instance, one shopper received a survey invitation at 6:18 p.m. and attempted to participate less than two hours later – only to be told (without answering a single question) he did not qualify.



PANEL 4

Invitations Received in 30 Days per Panel Member: 11

Average Frequency: one invitation every 2.7 days

Completed Surveys: 2.5

Did Not Qualify: 7

Closed: 1

Other: 0.5 (technical difficulties with a small number of questionnaires)

This panel also left our shoppers with a pretty good experience. Invitations arrived about every three days, and a number of those were studies for which our shoppers did not qualify. We averaged 2.5 completed surveys per respondent during our test month.

Like Panel 2, there were a lot of studies for which our shoppers did not qualify. It’s not possible to know whether this panel would have sent fewer invitations if there had been a

higher qualification rate (some panels track the number of completed surveys per panel member – not the number of invitations sent).

However, in general, this panel was respectful of people's time. During the sign-up process, right up front, they tell panel members about what they can expect in terms of volume, and they pretty much stayed true to that. They also did not give respondents the opportunity to complete multiple studies in a row, nor did they use any portals prior to the actual survey experience. All in all, this was a good experience for panel members, and no major questions were raised about the quality of responses.



PANEL 5

Invitations Received in 30 Days per Panel Member: 57

Average Frequency: 1.9 invitations *every day*

Completed Surveys: 15.5

Did Not Qualify: 26

Closed: 14

Other: 1.5 (technical problems kept our shoppers from completing a small number of surveys. There were also a couple of invitations to qualitative research that were refused because we felt that participation in such a small group could negatively impact the results for the end client)

Like Panel 1, this well-known panel from a long-established company seems intent on filling up e-mail inboxes rather than on getting good quality respondents for your research. The number of actual survey invitations was outrageously high, and it never lessened as our shoppers completed more and more questionnaires.

As hard as it may be to believe, our shoppers got even more invitations from this panel than from Panel 1 – on average, 1.9 invitations *per day*. On one Wednesday, one shopper received survey invitations at 7:30 a.m., 7:44 a.m., 9:07 a.m., 11:45 a.m., 11:52 a.m., 12:36 p.m., 1:20 p.m., and 6:33 p.m. for separate surveys. Lest you think this an anomaly, the next day, he received six more invitations – then four more on Friday, five more on Saturday, and five more on Sunday.

In addition, like Panel 1, panel members had the ability to respond to one survey invitation and then move on to a second, a third, a fourth, etc. In nine out of ten survey invitations, panel members had the opportunity to complete additional surveys after completing (or failing to qualify for) the first one.

In one example, a shopper completed a questionnaire and was sent to a second one. He did not qualify for the second one, but was sent to a third. He completed the third, and was sent to a fourth. Our shopper simply gave up at this point, with no end in sight. What this means

is that the number of completed interviews shown above might well be doubled, tripled, quadrupled, or worse, depending on the respondent's drive to complete questionnaires.

The one saving grace of this panel is that at least it did not use a portal. Still, one is left staggered by the sheer volume of survey opportunities panel members have. The only thing exceeding the number of invitations was the size of the doubt about the quality of responses clients receive from Panel 5.

Are you relying on data generated by this panel?



PANEL 6

Invitations Received in 30 Days per Panel Member: 2

Average Frequency: one invitation every 15 days

Completed Surveys: none

Did Not Qualify: 2

Closed: none

Our shoppers heard so infrequently from this panel that we began to wonder if they were even active. But when we'd start to doubt, one more invitation would show up. Even after the thirty-day test period ended, our shoppers received the occasional invitation.

We are not aware of any publicly available research that demonstrates the minimum amount of contact necessary to keep panel members engaged and response rates reasonable. Our only question would be whether one survey invitation every two weeks would demonstrate sufficient opportunity for panel member engagement. If the panel has strong response rates, then this appears to be a pretty solid option for finding respondents who don't log on every day looking for how many surveys they can complete. But if response rates are low, this is likely a sign of a relatively disinterested and disengaged panel community.

In any case, this panel certainly eliminates the concern of *overuse* of respondents. For clients looking for a more pristine, untapped panel source (in direct contrast to the extreme overuse of Panel 1 and Panel 5 profiled in this report), this would most definitely be an option to consider.



PANEL 7

Invitations Received in 30 Days per Panel Member: 1.5

Average Frequency: one invitation every 20 days

Completed Surveys: 0.5

Did Not Qualify: 1

Closed: none

This was the least active of the tested panels. Survey invitations arrived only about every three weeks, on average. One shopper received one invitation during her entire thirty-day test period.

If there are any legitimate concerns about panel member engagement with Panel 6, those concerns should be even greater in this panel, given that contact is even more infrequent. But to their credit, this panel does tell prospective members during the sign-up process that they should expect to “participate in several surveys per year.” Projected over a full year, our shoppers would have had an opportunity to participate in 18 surveys in 12 months – about the same number as members of Panel 5 would be able to participate in during *one or two days*.

While technically 18 is more than “several,” this panel provider certainly is up-front with prospective panel members, and they keep their promise not to over-burden respondents. This is probably as close to river sample as a pre-recruited panel gets, and it definitely eliminates the problem of respondent abuse. If response rates are strong, this is definitely an option to consider.



PANEL 8

Invitations Received in 30 Days per Panel Member: 5

Average Frequency: one invitation every 6.0 days

Completed Surveys: 3

Did Not Qualify: 2

Closed: none

In contrast to Panel 3, not a single survey from Panel 8 was already closed by the time our shoppers attempted to respond. Our shoppers were able to complete only an average of three surveys during the test month, and invitations were limited to an average of five for the month. There were no portals, and no ability to move from one completed study to the next.

This was one of the panels that provided members with a reasonable experience, and one that (at least based on frequency of contact) would likely provide reasonable quality data to researchers.



PANEL 9

Invitations Received in 30 Days per Panel Member: 22.5

Average frequency: one invitation every 1.3 days

Completed Surveys: 5.5

Did Not Qualify: 10.5

Closed: 5.5

Other: 1 (technical problems occurred on a very small number of studies, and invitations to participation in qualitative research were declined because of the potential negative impact for the end client)

This panel varied considerably by shopper. One shopper completed a low of 2 surveys during her month, while another completed a high of 9.

For all shoppers, plenty of invitations were received (averaging one every 1.3 days), but some of them closed very quickly, and our shoppers did not qualify for a number of others. The quick closure rates are a concern, as discussed for Panel 3. And as mentioned with Panel 3 and Panel 4, the high number of surveys for which our shoppers did not qualify makes it hard to know just how much panel members are allowed to participate. Some panels track and limit the number of completed surveys per panel member, rather than the number of invitations sent or surveys attempted. For Panel 9, the number of invitations was very high, but shoppers averaged just 5.5 surveys completed in thirty days, which is on the high side, but not outrageous like Panel 1 or Panel 5.

One other concern about this panel is that, like Panel 1, it employed a portal before most questionnaires, meaning that prior to completing a survey for you, panel members get asked a few questions that screen for qualified respondents on different topics, such as how often they use smokeless tobacco, or what software they used to file their tax return this year.

If the client is not given the opportunity to approve what questions will precede their own questionnaire, this could be a real problem due to potential respondent bias. Portal questions could also bias response rates. For instance, asking everyone their sexual preferences or religious beliefs prior to receiving your questionnaire could offend some people and have them terminate the study before even getting to your questions.

While this may not actually be a regular problem, it is most definitely a *potential* problem for every study that uses this panel – and can you guarantee that your study won't be the one biased in some way by a portal question?



PANEL 10

Invitations Received in 30 Days per Panel Member: 5

Average frequency: one invitation every 6 days

Completed Surveys: 3

Did Not Qualify: 2

Closed: none

Many panels talk about contacting panel members about once a week. This one actually does it. Our shoppers averaged one survey invitation every six days, and on average completed three questionnaires during their one-month membership. They also experienced *no* closed studies.

This latter point is important. Although panel companies often simply take orders from clients in terms of how long the survey project should stay open, it was fascinating to note just how quickly some studies closed. Our shoppers tried to get to each invitation within 24 hours of receipt (and often responded within an hour or two), but the realities of life (short trips, kids, commitments, etc.) meant that sometimes they didn't attempt a survey for a couple of days after receiving their invitation – exactly like real panel members behave.

On some other panels, surveys were closed as little as two hours after invitations were sent. Up to 37% of all survey invitations from other panels closed before our shoppers could complete the survey, depending on the panel. This means not only are some panels allowing members to participate in far more surveys than they should, but some are compounding the problem by regularly including only the panel members who respond most quickly.

Again, we can't blame the panel companies entirely for this, because some clients want their study in and out of the field in a ridiculously short amount of time. But it was noteworthy that some panel companies had very high rates of closed surveys, while others (like this one) did not. Each individual case may represent a client decision, but the high number of closed studies on some panels and the low number on others does suggest something about each panel's quality standards.



PANEL 11

Invitations Received in 30 Days per Panel Member: 2

Average frequency: one invitation every 15 days

Completed Surveys: 2

Did Not Qualify: none

Closed: none

This was another panel that strictly limited how many opportunities our shoppers had to participate in surveys. Their communication with panel members was professional and subdued, rather than hyping all the survey opportunities available. There was no over-use of

panel members. There were no portals or abusive surveys asking for an hour of time in return for a sweepstakes entry. There was no ability to move from one survey to the next in a long line of completed studies.

This panel may be a good option for researchers seeking “fresher” respondents from a panel provider (although with only two invitations during the month, there was no real way to tell if closed studies present a problem). The only question, like with Panel 6 and Panel 7, is whether respondents are kept engaged enough to stay on the panel and participate. If not, this could lead to poor response rates and therefore response bias.



PANEL 12

Our final panel proved to be quite a conundrum. This company has its own proprietary panel, but the link to sign up was inactive during our entire test. So our shoppers could never become members of this particular panel.

However, all of our shoppers still saw this name regularly, because this company used most of the other panels we tested. They used the good panels...the not-so-good panels...and the panels that had so much traffic as to render their data highly suspect.

In fact, over half of the surveys our shoppers attempted for Panel 3 were actually for Panel 12. Our shoppers even had the opportunity to complete the same questionnaire for this panel company multiple times through multiple different panel providers. A much greater concern is that there were a couple of times when a shopper had the opportunity to complete the same questionnaire more than once *through the same panel*.

This raises a huge question for you: when you or your research vendor select a panel for your project, *are you sure that's actually the panel you're getting?* Or is your project being offloaded to another panel provider that you haven't vetted and approved? One panel provider that did a good job of not overusing respondents in our test promotes its partnership with other panels when there is a need for multiple panel sources – the problem is, one of its “approved” partners was the worst of the panels tested in this study. So even if you contract with a “good” panel, is that the panel you're actually getting?



IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUR RESEARCH

As we have just demonstrated, panel sample is most definitely *not* a commodity. And the typical panel member's experience is just one facet of selecting the right panel for an online research project – there are also issues such as response rates, level of representativeness,

ability to identify and remove cheaters, and ability to confirm a respondent's identity, among others.

What was truly frightening was the number of major research companies and Fortune 500 companies that were using the most abusive of the panels we tested. With the commitment to quality and the level of research expertise that supposedly reside in these major firms, it was shocking to see so many well-known brand names sponsoring studies using the worst of the panels. It is also amusing – in a black humor sort of way – to see advertisements that promote respondent quality and data accuracy for these same panels.

But if you think about it, bad products will always be part of our landscape. Yugo automobiles were sold for a number of years in the United States, even though doors would sometimes fall off at speeds exceeding twenty miles per hour. In the research world, there are not only panels with completely unacceptable quality, but also terrible focus group facilities, bad data analysts, and all manner of other problems. It is the research consumer's responsibility to weed out potential suppliers who lack the expertise, standards, or quality control to provide accurate information that will guide critical decisions. It is our hope that this report will raise these issues to a higher level of awareness and encourage you to do some critical investigation of online panels and the research firms that use them.

So the next time you're seeking research through an online panel, it's critical to know whether the panel you choose will provide the kind of data quality you want for your important project. And if you're going to work through a research vendor who will be selecting the panel, it is important to know whether that vendor has done their homework about the panels that are available.



ABOUT GREY MATTER RESEARCH

Grey Matter Research & Consulting has been operating since 1996, for many years under the name Ellison Research. Although the name has changed, the grey matter behind the company remains the same as when it opened.

Our clients are highly diverse and our work is very broad-based, with experience in retail, financial services, non-profit, publishing, automotive, health services, and other sectors. We assist them through both qualitative and quantitative research services.

We have also conducted numerous studies at our own expense to understand the American consumer mindset more thoroughly (including this one).

Results from these studies have been covered in the international media, such as *USA Today*, *The Financial Times of London*, Associated Press, MSNBC, *Los Angeles Times*, USA Radio

Network, *Dallas Morning News*, Salem Radio Network, *Manila Times*, and many other outlets in the USA, China, England, Canada, Russia, New Zealand, Norway, Korea, Sweden, Hungary, the Philippines, Australia, and other parts of the world.

Grey Matter Research is available to serve clients through privately commissioned research studies such as brand awareness, customer satisfaction, concept testing, and customer loyalty.

More information on the company is available on our website:
www.greymatterresearch.com.

Please contact Ron Sellers at 602-684-6294 for additional information.

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